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## **Transfigurations of the *Emploi* and Artistic Manifestations of Female (Heavy) Metal Singers**

### **Introduction**

In domestic studies regarding (heavy) metal culture, the oeuvre of female artists, singers, songwriters, instrumentalists, music video directors and visual designers still awaits in-depth interdisciplinary analyses. This paper devotes particular attention to female artists whose artistic, image and stage activities largely employ strategies of provocation, scandalisation, 'ceremonial profanity' (Goffman 2006: 85–90).

In terms of image (self)creation, an interesting category seems to be the process of variability and fluidity of the *emploi*, especially in relation to subversive and seditious activities. Selected narrative texts by primarily American (heavy) metal artists, Wendy Orlean Williams as well as Carly Harvey and Heidi Shepherd of the Butcher Babies, will be discussed herein. The activity of the first musician – a transgenre performer, singer and songwriter – is entangled in a complex network of ideological, feminist and masculinist discourses, also concerning gender, body, corporeality, sex and power. The activity of the Californian group founded in 2010 showcases a clear dialogue with the aesthetics of the work of this legendary (heavy) metal female artist as well as a specific continuation of her controversial artistic strategy.

### **Transfigurations of Female Artists' *Emploi* in the Discursive Landscape of Metal Culture**

The artistic practices of female performers and multimodal metal narratives may be analysed from the standpoint of various discourses. Here, we understood the discourse to be "a set of socially sanctioned practices of speaking that define both the place of the subject and the status of reality" (Markowski 2006: 536; cf. also Lisowska-Magdziarz 2019: 39). Bogusław Skowronek observes that "thanks to the discourse, certain communication behaviours and the texts that are their parts (linguistic or/and pertaining to other semiotic systems) are an expression of currently valid beliefs existing within a given community" (Skowronek: 108). According to the researcher, the discourse "is never neutral in terms of the worldview. It is a fundamental condition of constructing identity, both individual and collective" (ibidem). While discussing the category of discourse, the equally complex and multifaceted

concept of ideology is often mentioned. In this article, ideology is understood as “a specific system of representation through which interlocutors within the act of communication enter into an imagined relation towards the actual conditions of their social functioning” (Lisowska-Magdziarz 2019: 392). In the case of the heavy metal artists in question, the already unique images of female singers may be considered in discursive and ideological contexts. From the perspective of playing stage and media roles, the transformation of the *emploi* proves interesting. Familiarity with the definitions of this category seems essential here.

According to *Słownik wyrazów obcych i zwrotów obcojęzycznych z almanachem* by Władysław Kopaliński, an *emploi* is “a type of a role in which an actor specialises,” Fr. ‘utility; occupation, position; from *employer* ‘to use, employ;’ from Latin *impli-care* (Kopaliński 1994: 149). *Wielki słownik wyrazów obcych i trudnych* by Andrzej Markowski and Radosław Pawelec defines *emploi* a little broader, namely as:

a speciality of an actor or an opera singer: the kind of roles or performances in which they are cast and play most successfully: an actor’s *emploi* is usually closely related to their physical and mental features; recognisable actors are usually cast in comedic roles, while lovers are played by handsome and mysterious men. However, casting in cinema and theatre nowadays do not see the *emploi* as equally important as it once was and actors play a wide variety of characters (Markowski, Pawelec 2001: 207–208).

In turn, Leon Zaręba’s *Słownik idiomatyczny francusko-polski* draws attention to the aspect of playing the role of someone and, importantly, ‘role-playing’ as someone, which is linked to the concept of the *emploi* (Zaręba 2000: 388). Contexts concerning character creation, “pretending to be someone else,” but also fun and entertainment seem relevant for the analysis of the artistic practices of male and female heavy metal artists. Tadeusz Paleczny analyses the phenomenon of play in contemporary culture and notices that it is tied more and more closely with “multimedial, virtual ‘worlds,’ areas where the boundary between what is fun or entertaining and the lifestyle, subculture, work and earning is blurred” (Paleczny 2012: 23). The sociologist claims that “play, just like any other element of culture, especially the art that accompanies it, crosses all boundaries, not only spatial but also semiotic, ethical and temporal” (*ibidem*). The researcher points to the transgressions of various components of culture:

Therefore, transgression is also a form of self-defence against the universalisation, commercialisation and formalisation of play. It leads to the emergence of two tendencies: the protection of traditional, communal forms of play in local communities, ethnic, regional and national cultural groups, and the crossing of the boundaries of uniform, homogeneous cultures and the emergence of its new, subcultural forms. Play forms an inseparable cultural syndrome associated with entertainment, which currently becomes not only a factor of universalisation but also – in many cases – of maintaining distinctiveness, resisting the dominant phenomena of globalisation (Paleczny 2012: 23–24).

According to the psychologist Józef Koziński, transgressions are “all human activities and mental acts that transgress the limits of an individual’s possibilities to date, their material, symbolic and social achievements and those that create new

forms and new structures enriching the person's values" (Kozielecki 1987: 47; see also Kozielecki 2001; Kozielecki 2002; Kozielecki 2004). Transgression is oriented towards 'triggering social change' (Paleczny 2014: 13). According to Tadeusz Paleczny, it is associated with transculturalism, transsexualism, postmodernity, post-structuralism, new social movements, and "manifests itself in culture as a 'new wave' phenomenon, arising from nihilism, decadence and criticism rooted in post-modern thought. The 'new wave' culture is generally iconoclastic, contesting, innovative and provocative. It exists also thanks to mass media and virtual space. It knows no boundaries" (Paleczny 2012: 24).

The idea of a transgression is obviously complex and has been the subject of many years of multi-threaded, interdisciplinary academic research; at this point, this area as the context for analysing the work of female heavy metal artists is only signalled. Transgressions in metal culture have already been investigated by scholars of metal music studies (cf. e.g., Kahn-Harris 2007; Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, LeVine 2013; Kirner-Ludwig, Wohlfarth 2018). From the viewpoint of the artistic activity in metal, attention is drawn by transgressive forms of play which, according to Tadeusz Paleczny, are "on the one hand, an expression of protest against the dominant popular culture imposing common patterns of participation in mass culture and, on the other hand, an attempt to preserve one's individuality and emphasise personal originality" (2012: 26).

The American singer and songwriter Wendy Orlean Williams (1949–1998) played the transgressive game with her own *emploi* throughout her career. The artistic messages created by female heavy metal artists in question are therefore worth viewing in the broader context of multimodal communication and social semiotics. This approach to the study of popular music is proposed by a communicologist David Machin. The author of the publication entitled *Analysing Popular Music. Image, Sound, Text* notices that analyses of popular music should take into account various codes, e.g., musical, visual, textual. The researcher states:

Bands must wear the right gear and have the right haircuts. The right mood must be created through publicity shots and record sleeves. So in theory we should be able to describe the available repertoire for creating musical moods and looks. Lyrics themselves can communicate something about a band that can be analysed. Heavy-metal songs tend to contain different lyrics than rap, folk or country music. And lyrics that deal with the same topics over time take very different approaches to them. We are more familiar with assessing song lyrics in terms of the story they tell, how much they contain feeling, what message they have. But when we look more carefully we find much deeper meanings that tie them to particular times, places and ideas (Machin 2010: 3).

Analyses of multimodal metal narratives may also be conducted in the light of transmedial narratology, according to which:

a narrative is not just a linguistic representation of causally related states and events, but also their **mental representation**, "a cognitive concept that may be activated by various types of signs." Such an approach frees narratological research from the linguistic paradigm and places the narrative itself on a transmedial level – as a category that is

not bound to a single medium and is prone to taking on different forms. (Kaczmarczyk 2017: 22; see also Ryan 2004: 9).

This article pays particular attention to image strategies and artistic narratives of female singers associated with the broadly defined genre of heavy metal. Studies of female artistic activity in popular music often emphasise the complexity of identity, experience, events in personal life (see e.g., Dibben 1999; Reddington 2012; Whiteley 2013; Kiec 2013; Clifford-Napoleone 2015). The musicologist Sheila Whiteley analysed the activities of iconic female artists such as Janis Joplin, Joni Mitchell, Patti Smith, Madonna, k.d. lang, Tracy Chapman and Tori Amos, ever resonant in popular culture, in the following way:

Their contribution to popular music – not least in opening the doors to the next generation of women musicians – is equalled only by their personal struggle against the inherently sexist attitudes that underpin the ‘material world’ of the music industry. In this respect, there is a comparability with the broader struggle against sexism that characterises second-wave feminism in aspects like the emphasis on practicality and pragmatism – equality in law, equal pay for equal work, control over body and image, and access to the production of knowledge, culture and so forth (Whiteley 2013: 1–2).

Wendy Orlean Williams, like the aforementioned Joni Mitchell, Patti Smith and Janis Joplin, represents a group of Anglo-Saxon singers born in the 1940s. However, the artist has been granted less space in music criticism and academic studies. Interestingly enough, Williams’ activities have become the subject of research conducted from a legal perspective. Yxta Maya Murray examines the singer’s controversial practices of exposing her body and their consequences in the form of arrests and court cases involving Williams. The researcher notices in the artist’s history a strategy of using her own body as a political manifesto, a tool to fight discrimination, racism, homophobia, sexism. The lawyer also indicates the changeability of the singer’s *emploi* with sensitivity resembling that of a culture studies researcher:

Williams countered a white supremacist and hetero-patriarchal look by performing in a musical ensemble that contained men of color and perhaps gender-nonconforming men. She also manifested her own aggressive sexuality while shearing herself of the graces that make women appear to be acquiescent and approachable. That is, she shaved her long blonde hair, that “heterosexual disguise”, into the bristling Mohawk, which may have been rooted in a controversial effort to align herself with non-whites, as some critics have thought of the hairstyle’s place in punk culture (Murray 2016: 303).

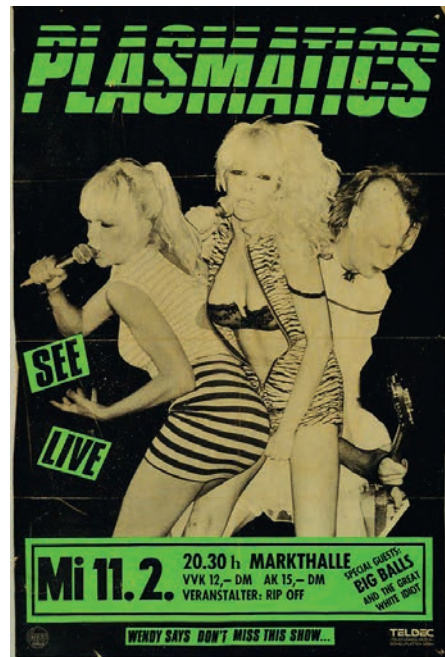
The multifaceted exhibitionism of Wendy O. Williams should therefore be treated as a specific image, stage and performance strategy; however, her activity in this regard may also be considered as political activity (cf. Jeziński 2011: 271–289). This paper neither intends to reconstruct the artist’s biography (see Eisgrau 2020) nor to characterise the art of its ceremonial profanations (cf. Kosek 2020). However, the very process of transfiguring the artist’s *emploi* deserves attention. The posters announcing the Plasmatics concerts in the early 1980s show Williams with long blonde hair, strong makeup, blouses that distinctly reveal the décolletage,

short skirts (see Picture 1, Picture 2). In the case of this artist, these components are symbolic in the (self)ironic game with the patriarchal heavy metal paradigm. The singer's stage *emplou* was undergoing a metamorphosis and costumes associated with BDSM practices and the porn industry soon became a distinctive image feature of her performances in the 1980s. Williams' ritualistic, almost pornographic acts of exposing herself were, however, an emancipatory and subversive strategy of profanation, also aimed at the patriarchalism in metal culture.

The performer's artistic communication exceeded the borders of playing (with) carnality, shocking stage acts, concert robustness, manifested by things like cutting guitars with a chainsaw, firing a shotgun and making Cadillacs explode on stage. Apart from her expressive performance activities, the singer's multimodal artistic narrative was also a clear manifestation of her views expressed in cover iconography, song lyrics or interviews. The content of the verbal-musical pieces performed by Williams was characterised by sometimes very primitive simplicity, vulgarity, nihilism and literalism. Nevertheless, her works contained a critical vision of the world and the society, especially when it came to privileged groups, elites and the political establishment.



Il. 1. Poster promoting the performance of the band Plasmatics at the Hammersmith Odeon in London in 1980.



Il. 2. Poster promoting the performance of the band Plasmatics at the Markthalle in Hamburg in 1981.

In the song *Corruption* from the album *New Hope for the Wretched* (1980), the punk rock-like sound layer is enriched with the sound of gunshots and Williams recites here:

It's Easy Money Baby  
 It's Fast And Easy Honey  
 It Only Hurts The First Time  
 It Puts You In The Big Time

Oh Corruption  
 Corruption  
 So Misunderstood  
 Corruption  
 Corruption  
 Makes You Feel So Good  
 Oh I Feel It Coming  
 (*Corruption*, in: *New Hope for the Wretched*, Stiff America, US, 1980)

Such a short song already reveals the elements of poetics typical of the Plasmatics: slogans, repetitions, suggestive phrases spoken at the recipient, sexual allusions, ironically depicted unethical social practices, in this case – corruption. *Corruption* was followed by the closing track entitled *Butcher Baby* (previously released as a single of the same name – *Butcher Baby*, Vice Squad, US, 1978). The title would later become the inspiration for the name of a Californian group formed in 2010 by singers Heidi Shepherd and Carla Harvey, guitarist Henry Flury, drummer Chris Warner and bassist Jason Klein. In Williams' expressively sung/shouted song, we hear the following lines:

Butcher Baby  
 Dressed Up In Red  
 Butcher Baby  
 Messed In Your Head  
 Butcher Baby  
 Go Out At Night  
 Butcher Baby  
 Turn Out The Light

Oh Yea!  
 Oh No!  
 [...]

Butcher Baby  
 You're Dressed To Kill  
 Butcher Baby  
 I Know You Will  
 Butcher Baby  
 Today Is The Day  
 Butcher Baby  
 (They're) Gonna Put You Away  
 (*Butcher Baby*, in: *New Hope for the Wretched*, Stiff America, US, 1980)

Surrealist textual motifs were complemented and expressively highlighted during stage performances. It is worth noting that all of the band members were involved in the creation of those eccentric shows – the male instrumentalists accompanying

Williams wore a variety of artefacts and costumes on stage, including black face coverings, masks, women's bodies, dresses, but also suits and military outfits. Williams commented on the Plasmatics concert concept in 1983 in the following way: "We'd like to do five concerts a year, outdoors, and make them only accessible by mule train. During the concert, it would be like we'd created our own city. Then, after the concert, we'd level the city to the ground and everyone would have to leave by mule train. We want to be able to build a city and destroy it<sup>1</sup>."

Another verbal and musical narrative embedded in ideological discourse should be pointed out as it constitutes an important artistic manifesto, in a way defining Williams' 'political programme.' The song *Pig is a Pig* from the album *Beyond The Valley Of 1984* begins with an ironic dedication to representatives of selected social groups, including journalists and politicians:

Now this song is dedicated to a special kind of person  
 The kind of person that's hiding under rocks and in closets  
 Wherever you go  
 Hiding behind a guise of respectability  
 The cowardly journalist who hides behind his typewriter  
 Exploiting people who can't fight back  
 The assassin who strikes people by surprise  
 The sickie sadist who hides behind his police badge  
 To commit crimes of violence against other people  
 Whatever role they are playing  
 These creeps are always the same [...]  
 (*Pig is a Pig*, in: *Beyond The Valley Of 1984*, Stiff America, US, 1981)

After that, the singer yells: "Because a pig is a pig. And that's that!" By using motifs from George Orwell's famous novels (*Animal Farm: A Fairy Story* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), the song is probably also an expression of Williams' autobiographical experiences (see Murray 2016), directed against deception, manipulation (by the media, by politicians) and frequent violence of police officers.

Anarchist, anti-capitalist social criticism may of course be found in the oeuvre of numerous rock and metal musicians. Among female hard rock/(heavy) metal artists involved in such issues, we may mention Joan Jett, Maria Brink, Otep Shamaya, Angela Gossow and Heidi Shepherd and Carla Harvey of the Butcher Babies, among others. The last two artists mentioned here clearly utilise the artistic strategy of Wendy O. Williams. By provoking controversy with their image, stage performances and audiovisual realisations, they are gradually attracting the attention of an increasingly larger audience. The eponymous mini album released in 2012 entitled *Butcher Babies* already refers to Williams. The correspondence between visual contents is also evident; the cover of the Plasmatics shows the band leader holding a chainsaw, while on the album jacket of the Californian band one of the singers, Carla Harvey, is holding a huge axe. The images show only female singers, which may emphasise the feminist optics of the group, showing women as the leaders of the band as other musicians, men, are presented on the back cover.

<sup>1</sup> After: <https://pleasekillme.com/wendy-o-williams-plasmatics/>. (access: 15.05.2021).

The singers play with the “metal,” “female” *emploi* in several dimensions. The hyper-feminine image (long hair coloured in various hues, strong makeup, tight, leather and figure-hugging outfits, dresses and blouses with deep necklines, etc.) obviously draws the attention of the large male heterosexual public. The *image* of those female singers, associated with famous covers and spreads in “men’s” magazines like “Playboy” or “Penthouse,” fits perfectly into the stereotypical paradigm of metal patriarchal culture. The artists consciously use this image strategy, oscillating between kitsch and pornography, to emphasise the voice and presence of women. The Butcher Babies refer to the porn industry probably for commercial, self-promotional reasons. An example of this may be found in the music video for the song *Headspin* from the album *Lilith* (2017), which features a guest appearance by the American porn actress known by her stage name Jessa Rhodes. In the video, she becomes the object of desire for a young man staying in his small room but “in touch” with his hyper-real sexual fantasy via special glasses using the new *virtual reality* (VR) technology. The multi-code recording could also be interpreted from the psychoanalytic standpoint. The song’s lyrics contain references to the sphere of sexual instincts, erotic urges, but also thanatological motifs: “Give it to me, I need to know you’re mine/ Steady hands cause we’ve been here before/ I want it all/ Not wasting time so give me some more/ I want it now/ Stay and bury yourself in me/ My body aches, my body shakes/ I try to scream but nothing comes out” (*#iwokeuplikethis*, in *Lilith*, Century Media, US, 2017).

The songs on several albums released so far comment in a suggestive manner on selected current affairs and socio-cultural problems, mainly concerning stereotyping social and gender roles (topics already signalled, for example, in the titles of albums and songs, such as *Blonde Girls All Look The Same; Take It Like A Man*), and contemporary digital practices, e.g., actions in social media usually signed with a recognisable *hashtag*. *#iwokeuplikethis* from the 2017 album *Lilith* made a sarcastic reference to an online campaign promoted, among others, by the singer Beyonce, which encouraged people to publish images showing supposedly unretouched photographs of them looking natural, without makeup, preferably just “woken up.” In the aforementioned song by the Butcher Babies, the recipients hear the following words sung with an almost black metal growl:

Woke up  
 I woke up in a plastic bubble  
 Breathing this plastic air but you weren’t there to calm, calm my nerves  
 For the first time didn’t even care  
 I got up walked around these cold dark places on my own  
  
 All, all while tripping  
 While tripping on my toe tag  
 Choking on my consciousness ‘cause now I know I’ve died the most  
 All, all while tripping  
 While tripping on my toe tag  
 Confusion came to check my pulse ‘cause now they know I’ve died the most



Toe tag

Toe tag

Sign and date my toe tag

Stamp and tie my toe tag

Lace it up

To tag

Bag me up

My toe tag

[...]

(#iwokeuplikethis, in: *Lilith*, Century Media, US, 2017)

What draws attention in this rather absurd narrative is the repeated motif of the 'toe tag.' A cardboard *toe tag* is hung on the toe of a deceased person whose body is kept in the morgue. Therefore, this Instagram *tag* is a pretext for an ironic, critical play with digital practices in the discourse of the social media. It is worth adding that the singers have their official accounts, also on Instagram, where they are regularly active, communicate with fans, publish photographs and short recordings from concerts.

### Concluding Remarks

The activity of female (heavy) metal artists escapes easy, unambiguous and stereotypical generalisations, as the article attempted to outline. It is obvious that they function in a highly masculinised environment, dominated by male performers, stage workers, organisers, managers. However, in terms of performance skills, they are not falling behind the male vocalists and instrumentalists, as proven by the effective practices of female (heavy) metal music groups and artists (see Kosek 2021), such as Girlschool, Joan Jett, Lita Ford, Doro Pesch, Tarja Turunen, Deborah "Skin" Dyer, Alissa White-Gluz, Poppy, Tatiana Shmailyuk and Otep Shamaya.

Wendy Orlean Williams, Heidi Shepherd and Carla Harvey of the Butcher Babies discussed here are all artists with a controversial track record in the patriarchal system of popular culture. However, the transgressive and subversive artistic and image strategies employed by those singers fall in line with the over half-century history and aesthetics of metal culture. The oeuvre of the Californian band forms an evident dialogue with the profane art of the eccentric singer Williams. However, the ceremonial, controversial stage acts of the "Queen of shock rock," despite their radicality and exuberance, expanded but surely followed the convention of the specific artistic vision cultivated by Arthur Brown, Alice Cooper and the Kiss. These various, colourful *emploi* of male and female artists prove the diversity and complexity of metal culture.

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### Abstract

The studies of (heavy) metal culture, the oeuvre of female artists, singers, lyricists, etc., still await in-depth interdisciplinary research endeavours. This article devoted special attention to female artists whose artistic, stage and image activities largely employ strategies of provocation, scandalisation, “ceremonial profanation.” When it comes to image (self)creation, an interesting category is the process of variability and fluidity of the *emploi*, especially in relation to subversive and transgressional activities. Wendy Orlean Williams, Heidi Shepherd and Carla Harvey from Butcher Babies discussed here have aroused frequent controversies in their activity in the patriarchal system of popular culture. The subversive artistic and image strategies used by the singers are nevertheless a part of the over fifty-years-long history and aesthetics of metal culture. The oeuvre of the Californian band forms an evident dialogue with the provocative art of the eccentric singer Williams. The colourful artistic *emploi* of those female artists attests to the diversity and complexity of metal culture.

### Transfiguracje *emploi* i artystyczne manifestacje twórczyń (heavy)metalowych

#### Streszczenie

W studiach nad kulturą (heavy)metalową twórczość artystek, piosenkarek, autorek tekstów etc. oczekuje jeszcze pogłębionych interdyscyplinarnych opracowań. W prezentowanym artykule szczególna uwaga została poświęcona twórczyniom, których działania artystyczne, sceniczne i wizerunkowe w znacznej mierze wykorzystują strategie prowokacji, skandalizacji, “ceremonialnych profanacji”. W perspektywie (auto)kreatywności wizerunkowej interesujący okazuje się proces zmienności i płynności *emploi*, szczególnie w odniesieniu do działań o wywrotowym i transgresywnym charakterze. Omawiane w szkicu Wendy Orlean Williams oraz Heidi Shepherd i Carla Harvey z Butcher Babies to artystki, których działalność w patriarchalnym systemie kultury popularnej wzbudza(ła) znaczne kontrowersje. Stosowane przez piosenkarki subwersywne strategie artystyczne i wizerunkowe wpisują się jednak w długą, ponad pięćdziesięcioletnią historię i estetykę kultury metalowej. Twórczość kalifornijskiego zespołu stanowi czytelny dialog z prowokacyjną sztuką ekscentrycznej Williams. Barwne artystyczne *emploi* twórczyń świadczy zaś o różnorodności i złożoności kultury metalowej.

**Keywords:** metal culture, American female (heavy) metal artists, transfigurations of the *emploi*, metal studies

**Słowa kluczowe:** kultura metalowa, amerykańskie artystki (heavy)metalowe, transfiguracje *emploi*, metal studies

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